



## For Russian kids, baseball not lost in translation

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NEWINGTON — It's a part of the Williamsport experience that Little League baseball doesn't want you to see.

Nestled far away from the action at Lamade Stadium, where a group of Portsmouth kids got to experience thrills to last a lifetime last August, and tucked behind a laundry, is an area for adults to partake in a less glamorous national pastime.

Smoking.

If not for that "cigarette table," Portsmouth assistant coach Joe Arsenault and Russian assistant coach Andrey Tselikovsky may never have crossed paths, and starting talking, puffing and striking up a friendship.

If not for that table, the two may never have discussed the possibility of the Russian coach one day bringing a national team to the Seacoast to get equal tastes of American culture and diamond competition.

And, if not for that table, our area may never have seen this kind of almost surreal baseball summit, with some of the players from a pair of last summer's World Series entrants buddying up and duking it out away from the ESPN spotlight, like Creed and Balboa at the end of "Rocky III."

Twenty years ago this week, President Reagan challenged Soviet premier Mikael Gorbachev to "tear down this wall." Now, the Russians are here and are swinging for the walls.

"Nobody here is worried about the G8 (summit) going on or nuclear weapons," said Jim Gaffney, one of the event's facilitators. "It's just baseball."

And lots of it.

The 17 Russian players are on the Seacoast for 10 days, staying with local host families on both sides of the Piscataqua since late last week and flying out this Monday. Ranging in age from 13 to 16, they came over to overdose on a sport they love, but one their country doesn't have the proper facilities for.

"A lot of people play baseball, but there are not a lot of fields for it," said Denis Chevelev, the team's 14-year-old left fielder.

Only three in the entire country, noted Tselikovsky.

"And all of them in Moscow," he said. "We play on soccer fields."

Tselikovsky's love of the game dates back to his childhood, when he lived for a time in Montreal near Olympic Stadium. In 1986, when it was determined that baseball would become a medal sport at the Olympics, the Soviet government began recruiting men to prepare their athletes.

"I knew the rules and I had a glove," said Tselikovsky, a former professional volleyball player. "When I read that baseball was going to be an Olympic sport, I wanted to get involved."

Since then, he's become one of the country's top baseball ambassadors, twice taking teams to the Little League World Series in Williamsport, Pa. That's where he crossed paths with the Portsmouth contingent.

"You're talking about your games and your strategies," said Arsenault. "You're not talking politics. It's just baseball."

Coaches even put together a tentative plan for the Portsmouth and Russia teams to play each other in a practice game, if both got knocked out of pool play early. Russia did. But Portsmouth advanced all the way to the U.S. semifinals.

Four boys from that Portsmouth team — Jordan Bean, Keegan Taylor, Conor Trefethen and Matthew Feeney — are on a USA Training Centers AAU 13-year-old team that scrimmaged the Russians last night. There have also been games against out-of-state teams, a trip to see the Portland Sea Dogs and a day of sitting in on classes with their new American comrades.

The center of this operation has been USA Training Centers in Newington, former minor leaguer Dave Hoyt's business that was formerly Home Run USA in the Southgate Plaza in Portsmouth. Arsenault brought the idea to Hoyt, a St. Louis Cardinals scout who had the facilities, connections — and curiosity — to make it happen.

"Every single one of these kids are terrific athletes," said Hoyt. "Great feet. Strong upper bodies. Not one of them's a slouch. They all hustle and all play hard."

The differences between American kids, he noted, is in the perception of the game. Not trying to go from first to third on a single to right. Freezing on a line drive. But, as a paid eye, Hoyt sees the country as a potential untapped resource.

"They're going to have a 6-foot-6, 250-pound left-handed pitcher someday," he said.

Gaffney, the business manager for USA Training Centers who was instrumental in ironing out the details, marveled at how the global sports scene has changed in just the last decade.

"(Andrey) would call me four or five times a week on my cell phone," he said. "I'd look down at the display and there would be about a hundred numbers."

Like baseball itself, crafting this trip has been a team effort. Shaw's and B.J.'s Wholesale donated lunches. **Indian Head Athletics** in Manchester and Daigneault's Sports Center in Kingston provided updated equipment. St. Thomas Aquinas High School lent the van and driver that picked the Russian team up at JFK Airport in New York last week.

Let Bush and Putin have the ocean in Kennebunkport. This week, the kids from Portsmouth and Moscow will take the batting cages on Gosling Road.